

The ‘textile scene’ in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*

Scott Scullion

Agamemnon is on stage for under a hundred of the 1,673 verses of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, and our direct experience of him is based largely on the ‘textile scene’ – traditionally called the ‘carpet scene’, but the textiles spread on the ground at Clytemnestra’s urging are not meant for walking on. One aspect of the significance of these crimson fabrics is not in doubt: as Agamemnon walks across them toward his imminent murder at Clytemnestra’s hands, they represent, in terms of the stage picture, a great spillage of his own blood. Murders in Greek tragedy always take place off stage and are normally mediated to the audience after the fact in a ‘reporter’s narrative’, but Aeschylus varies standard practice not only through this spectacular anticipation of the bloodshed but by having Priam’s daughter Cassandra give us a ‘prophet’s vision’ of the murder before it happens. Here, Scott Scullion questions some common assumptions about this dramatically significant scene.

The general view is that Aeschylus’ purpose in the ‘textile scene’ is to show Agamemnon committing ‘hubris’ – treading on valuable textiles out of arrogant, sacrilegious pride, and so to some extent justifying the death-sentence Clytemnestra executes. Agamemnon at first refuses to walk on the textiles, but many scholars assume that he secretly wishes to do so all along. In his great commentary on the play of 1950, Eduard Fraenkel, then Professor of Latin at Oxford, also regards Agamemnon’s act as hubristic, but claims that he only agrees to walk on the textiles – ‘as the true gentleman he always is’ – because Clytemnestra begs him. The notion of Agamemnon as ‘gentleman’ is today treated as a dated curiosity, but I think that Fraenkel was on to something important about the scene.

Reading between the lines

The heart of the matter lies in the ‘stichomythia’ (verse-by-verse dialogue) in which Clytemnestra prevails upon Agamemnon to walk across the textiles. It is essential to register the precise sense of each line in this developing exchange, and I therefore translate closely and carefully:

Cl: Now tell me this, without going against your own judgement. (931)

*these purples may no resentful eye
strike me from afar. For I feel
great reluctance to spoil the
house’s property under my feet,
ruining its wealth and textiles
bought with silver (949) . . . but
now, since I have been prevailed
upon to obey you in this (956) . . .*

The dynamics of this exchange require close attention. What techniques does Clytemnestra use to persuade her husband? Which of them fail? Which one of them succeeds? What do we learn about Agamemnon in the process?

Let us first reconsider the received view that treading on textiles is sacrilegious. The rules of Greek cult are generally clear and firm, but scholars perhaps assume that religious precepts provided more definitive guidance to behaviour across a wider range of non-cultic circumstances than was really the case. It is surely important here that Aeschylus presents walking on rich fabrics as something a human being might, on the advice of a competent religious professional, vow to do (verses 933–4), even if Agamemnon’s instinct is that ‘one ought to honour gods with such textiles,’ and that treading on them ‘is to my mind by no means free from fear’ (922–4). In other words, Agamemnon sees walking on fabrics as an unexpected and risky thing to do, but not as certainly sacrilegious.

When Clytemnestra claims that, if an oracle had so ordained (963–5), she would have vowed to trample many textile-garments for Agamemnon’s safe return, she is surely not trying to deceive through self-evident absurdity. Nor is it strange of Agamemnon to conceive of circumstances in which one might do what Clytemnestra proposes – the passage prompts us to remember that it was on the advice of Calchas, a famously reliable religious professional, that he sacrificed his daughter, Iphigenia, to Artemis (186, 199–201). No religious prohibition absolutely precludes textile-treading: it is a matter of human judgement, and in the present circumstances Agamemnon’s instinctive judgement rebels against Clytemnestra’s proposal. His instinct also rebelled against the sacrifice of Iphigenia. In that case he gave in to his sense of obli-

Ag: *My judgement, be assured, I
will not falsify.*

Cl: *Might you, in fear of some
danger, have vowed to the gods
that you would do this [walk on
the textiles]?*

Ag: *If someone with proper know-
ledge had really prescribed this
ritual.*

Cl: *And what do you think Priam
would have done, if he had accom-
plished such things [as you have]?* (935)

Ag: *I think – very much so! – that
he would have walked on textiles.*

Cl: *Then do not be abashed by
men’s reproaches.*

Ag: *The people’s talk, though, is a
powerful thing.*

Cl: *Yes, but he who isn’t resentfully
envied isn’t enviously admired.*

Ag: *It’s not womanly, you know, to
be eager for strife.* (940)

Cl: *But for those who prosper most
even yielding a victory is becoming.*

Ag: *Do you really put such a high
value on victory in this dispute?*

Cl: *O give in! If you yield to me
willingly you’re really the winner.*

Ag: *Well, if that’s what you’re set
on, let someone take off my shoes
quickly* (945) . . . and as I tread on

gation to his Greek allies against Troy (212–17), and here, I think, he gives in to his sense that he ought to oblige a near relation or close friend in an insistent personal request.

The power of the personal

One reason for drawing this conclusion is that Clytemnestra resorts to requesting a favour because she has failed to persuade Agamemnon on other grounds. When she asks whether he might have vowed to walk on textiles, he does not – secretly relishing the idea of such self-glorification – reply ‘Yes, I could imagine making such a vow’. Rather, he adds a qualification emphasising the unreality and improbability of what she is suggesting: ‘if an expert had really prescribed it’ (Greek *eiper . . . ge* in 934 means ‘if . . . really’). Similarly, her appeal to one-upmanship over Priam only produces the reply ‘Oh I’m quite sure he would have done it’, which – after Agamemnon has condemned her proposal at length, partly because of its resemblance to barbarian custom (918–30) – must imply ‘But I’m not a barbarian king like Priam, am I?’.

Clytemnestra now turns to the ideology of the ‘great man’ for one last rationalization. Envy of the great can be resentful as well as admiring, and Clytemnestra tries on the – obviously false – deduction that one cannot be great without doing things (such as walking on the textiles) which the people will resent (939). At this point Agamemnon loses patience and reproaches Clytemnestra for being aggressively contentious (940). Having failed to dent his resistance, she now shifts tactics, claiming that because he is a great man he should yield to her (941–3). It is this *personal* request (‘*O give in!* If you yield to *me* willingly . . .’) that makes the difference. Agamemnon is baffled by her insistence (‘Do you really put such a high value on victory in this dispute?’), but feels obliged to yield to her and what is now a personal request (‘Well, if that’s what you’re set on’, a Greek formula for yielding to someone very determined or insistent). He does what she wants, but only after he emphasizes, in his last words on stage, ‘I have been prevailed upon to obey you in this’, and only after having his shoes removed. If Aeschylus had wanted to portray an arrogant Agamemnon committing hubris, would he have him insist on going (ingloriously) barefoot so as to minimize damage to the textiles?

Friends and family

The best parallel for our passage is in Sophocles’ *Ajax*, where Odysseus tries in vain to persuade the Agamemnon of that play that he is wrong to have Ajax’s body

cast out unburied. Eventually Odysseus asks Agamemnon to allow proper burial as a personal favour, on the ground that ‘in yielding to your friends you are [and are seen to be] powerful’ (1353), and Agamemnon does so, explicitly as a favour (1370–3). The point is not of course that it is Agamemnon in both plays, but that the two scenes exemplify the same notion of how a great man should behave, even if – as in both cases – he finds the request incomprehensible. Despite Odysseus’ views (and Antigone’s views in Sophocles’ *Antigone*), it was ‘the common law among all Greeks’ to ‘cast out unburied’ the bodies of temple-robbers and, in Athens, of traitors. In *Ajax* too, then, there is no absolute standard to trump subjective judgement: it is rash of us to over-simplify the religious attitudes of the Greeks, which were as inconsistent and subject to qualification as those of any people. Our scene – and Tragedy in general – is concerned less with the transgression of objective rules than with the wide scope for ruinous conflicts of subjective thought, instinct, desire and emotion in a world short on absolutes.

So after all there is something in Fraenkel’s notion that Agamemnon behaves like a gentleman. He does so not on the basis of gender, as man to woman or husband to wife, but in the same way as the Agamemnon of *Ajax* is prevailed upon to yield, as great man to family or friend – and with similar unconcealed reluctance. The Agamemnon Aeschylus puts before us, it seems to me, is not an embodiment of arrogant hubris but the ‘gentlemanly’ dupe of Clytemnestra, whose manipulative management of his entrance to the palace is the onstage equivalent of her deceitful offstage management of his murder. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra are not aware of a religious rule that unconditionally prohibits walking on textiles, and I cannot see why modern scholars think they know better and are certain that it is sacrilege to do so. Setting up a supposedly objective religious ‘bottom line’ in this way distracts our attention from the confrontation of conflicting human wills, of stubborn prudence and determined manipulation, that plays out before us.

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Further reading:

Excellent brief discussions of the scene taking a very different line are Anne Lebeck, *The Oresteia: A Study in Language and Structure* (Cambridge, Mass. 1971) 74–9 and R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Studies in Aeschylus* (Cambridge, 1983) 88–93.